

The constitution protects freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respects these rights in practice, but many media outlets are beholden to major advertisers and owners with political agendas.

## **Legal Environment**

In 2014, banking regulators threatened to fine at least two media outlets for disseminating false or confidential information and demanded sources for their reporting on the financial sector, which was shaken by a run on two major banks during the year. Defamation is punishable by large fines, and government officials have filed suits against journalists, but the courts tend to favor press freedom in such cases. While the law on freedom of information is considered fairly robust, state institutions sometimes improperly deny information requests, and courts are not consistently supportive of access rights. The broadcasting regulatory body is subject to pressure from the government, politicians, and large corporate interests.

## **Political Environment**

The media environment remains pluralistic, but editors and journalists routinely shape their reporting to suit the political and economic interests of owners or major advertisers. The New Bulgarian Media Group (NBMG), owned by Irena Krasteva but widely believed to be controlled by her son, parliament member Delyan Peevski, has a history of strongly supporting whichever parties are in power. In June 2014, the group's outlets allegedly spread negative reports about a major bank after Peevski fell out with its owner; the bank temporarily closed after a run on deposits and the exposure of irregularities.

A large portion of the coverage of May 2014 European Parliament and October 2014 national parliamentary elections consisted of paid partisan content, which was often not labeled as such. Some television stations or hosts are explicitly associated with political parties, and those linked to right-wing nationalist factions often carry hate speech aimed at minorities and refugees.

Reporters continue to face pressure and intimidation aimed at protecting economic, political, and criminal interests. Journalists, commentators, and bloggers are sometimes questioned by law enforcement personnel about their activities, and prominent politicians have displayed intolerance for media criticism. There were several reports of harassment, threats, and physical attacks against journalists and media outlets in 2014. In April, the car of television host Genka Shikerova was torched in April for the second time in less than a year. In June, politician Kiril Rashkov and two of his aides threatened and attacked two newspaper journalists when they took pictures of him. Impunity for past crimes against journalists remains the norm, encouraging self-censorship.

## **Economic Environment**

A number of private newspapers publish daily, though most are owned by NBMG and a competitor, Media Group Bulgaria Holding. Foreign media companies own two of the three leading national television

stations, bTV and Nova TV; the third is the public broadcaster, Bulgarian National Television (BNT). Like Bulgarian National Radio, BNT generally provides substantive news coverage with a range of nonpartisan viewpoints, but it is vulnerable to potential government interference. Foreign firms have also played an important role in the print and radio sectors. Internet connections are readily available, and online media outlets have proliferated in recent years. The internet penetration rate in 2014 was more than 55 percent. Social media are extremely popular and play a crucial role in civic and political mobilization.

Media concentration remains problematic, and ownership transparency rules are weak and poorly enforced, though a law that took effect in 2014 was designed to restrict ownership of media by companies based in offshore tax havens. Some observers said the measure was aimed at rivals of the NBMG conglomerate, which controls multiple print, broadcast, and online outlets as well as the country's dominant print distribution business.

The shrinking private advertising market has increased the importance of state advertising and other de facto subsidies, especially for local outlets. Individual journalists face decreasing salaries and job insecurity, leading to unethical practices and acquiescence to editorial pressure.